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UTAH
LIFE ELEVATED

THE U.S. OF WAAH EEYY!

You could go to America and chase a giant mouse around a plastic kingdom – or enjoy some of the most unforgettable adventures on earth. By Rob Ryan

Amazingly, only three destinations account for 80% of British visitors to the United States – New York, Florida (principally Orlando) and California (principally Los Angeles). Which means that, as a nation, we are missing out on America's strongest attraction: as well as iconic cities and vast theme parks, the United States has nature in abundance. It is almost 140 years since it set up the world's first national park – Yellowstone – and its vast reservoir of protected places means it is a wonderful destination for getting to grips with the great outdoors. Whether it's wildlife, peace and quiet, dramatic scenery or "experiences" you crave, America has it in spades, if you know where to look. Here are 10 examples.

Yellowstone deluxe

Famed for its hot springs and geysers, Yellowstone National Park suffers from Famous Icon Syndrome: it is both truly spectacular and truly overcrowded in peak season. However, Far and Away Adventures (00 1 208 726 8888, far-away.com) specialises in taking small groups to the lesser-known parts of the park. You're whisked by speedboat to a fork of Yellowstone Lake, from where you kayak into remoter areas for guided back-country hikes, wildlife spotting (bears, coyotes, wolves, eagles) and fly-fishing. It's not exactly roughing it – there are luxurious safari-style tents with beds, candlelit dinners and fine wines. The three-day trip costs £525 for adults and £475 for children aged five and older, all-inclusive (add 10-15% for gratuities). A week's fly-drive out of

Jackson, Wyoming – 85 miles from the park – with American Airlines (0844 499 7300, americanairlines.co.uk) costs £689pp.

Round the bend

Really want to get away from it all? Consider Texas's Big Bend, the least visited of all America's national parks. Spanish explorers called this region *El Desplado* ("the uninhabited land"). A U-turn in the Rio Grande gives the 800,000-acre park on the Mexican border its name, and the place is home to spectacular geology. It encompasses both the Chihuahuan Desert and the Chisos Mountains, where tree-covered slopes act as a green oasis for wildlife. Trips on the river and hiking the volcanic scenery are the principal activities here. Try the local operator Big Bend River Tours (00 1 432 371 3033, bigbendrivertours.com). American Sky (0844 332 9392, americansky.co.uk)

has 12-night fly-drives out of Dallas (with BA or AA) that include a stop at Big Bend, from £1,479pp, including flights, car hire and hotels (room-only). Big Bend is about 500 miles from Dallas, so the company can tailor-make an itinerary to give you more time there – for example, flying with Southwest Airlines from Dallas to Midland-Odessa, which is 200 miles away.

Rock'n'ride

Utah's got the outdoors lot. Top of the tick list has to be Moab, which is the mountain-biking capital of the USA. The very slick adventure company Austin-Lehman (00 1 406 655 4591, austinlehman.com) runs several tours in the area, including one based at Red Cliffs Lodge, on the banks of the foaming Colorado River, where

part of John Wayne's Rio Grande movie was filmed. From there, you head out to bike and hike (10-40 miles' riding or 4-10 hiking each day) around Moab, plus the towering bluffs, buttes and pinnacles of the Arches and Canyonlands national parks. Five days cost £1,494pp, including accommodation, equipment, full support and all meals except for one dinner. Expedia (expedia.co.uk) has fares to the pick-up point in Grand Junction, Colorado, from £506, with BMI and United Airlines.

Here be giants

To walk among the giant redwoods of California is to feel well and truly dwarfed, by both their size and age. It is like threading your way between enormous organic Atlas rockets waiting for liftoff. The Redwood National Park, on the north Californian coast, is as good a place to see them as any. Redwood Adventures (00 1-866 733 9637, redwoodadventures.com) operates trips deep into the forests, offering guides, pick-up, drop-off and bike trips. It also rents out the Elk Meadow Cabins, which were originally built for sawmill workers when the trees were a different kind of resource. A three-bedroom cabin, with a kitchen, costs from £122. Or base yourself south of the park at the more luxurious Carter House Inn (707 444 8062, carterhouse.com; doubles from £97, B&B), in Eureka, which has a famously fine wine list. The best way to access this coast is a fly-drive from San Francisco (it's a five-hour drive north). Virgin Holidays (0844 557 3865, virginholidays.co.uk) has a week's fly-drive out of SF from £680pp.

The grizzly truth

America doesn't come much wilder

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than Katmai National Park and Preserve, in Alaska. The main town is King Salmon, which gives you an idea of what thrives in the waterways, and there is the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes, which tells you the place is volcanically hectic. Most exciting of all, there are grizzlies here, feasting on the salmon. Windows on the Wild (020 8742 1556, windowsonthewild.com) has two nights in Anchorage bracketing five nights, full-board, at the Katmai Wilderness Lodge, including flights from London (with BA/Alaska Airlines) to King Salmon and floatplane to the lodge, from £3,176pp. Activities include bear viewing, photography, bird watching, guided hiking, sea kayaking, beachcombing and visiting ancient archeological sites.

Killing time

The San Juan Islands straddle the Canadian-US border, between Vancouver and Seattle. Over the past 20 years they have become popular second-home sites for wealthy Seattleites, but the wildlife is still there — bald eagles patrol between islets and dolphins frolic in the wake of the ferries. The prime attractions here are the pods of orcas. You may have seen orcas, also known as killer whales, at SeaWorld, but that hardly replicates the frisson of seeing them leap from the water in close proximity to your kayak. Sea Quest Expeditions (00 1-360 378 5767, sea-quest-kayak.com) offers whale-watching day-trips from Seattle. But it is best to do a three-day (£330) or five-day (£499) excursion out of Friday Harbor and around San Juan Island, camping along the way, to increase the chances of decent sightings, plus the chance to see rarer species such as the minke whale. Also included is a hike to a cliff where peregrine falcons nest. Prices include all equipment

and half board. Fly to Friday Harbor by floatplane, from Seattle, with Kenmore Air (866 435 9524, kenmoreair.com), from £97. BA (0844 493 0758, ba.com/usa) flies to Seattle from £550.

Country roads

Rural and remote, West Virginia is one of the most forested states in the States, with nearly four-fifths of its 15m acres covered by trees, and it is both ruggedly mountainous and starkly beautiful. It is also home to some of the nation's longest and best whitewater rafting rivers. One of these, the New River, slices through limestone mountains for a spectacular 50 miles, at times in a gorge with walls that measure 1,000ft between riverbed and plateau. America as You Like It (020 8742 8299, americaasyoulikeit.com) offers a week's trip to West Virginia, which includes flights from Heathrow to Washington DC (with BA or Virgin), car hire, a night at Beckley (300 miles from Washington — it's the gateway to the parks) and six nights close to the New River, from £1,665pp. It features a two-day rafting trip, two days hiking the Gauley River National Recreation Area and a chance to zip-wire through the canopy.

Swamp fever

The Okefenokee Swamp, in Georgia (mostly — part of it pokes into Florida), is one of the world's great wetland wildernesses. It is home to herons, egrets, ibises and cranes, as well as toads, frogs, turtles, alligators and black bears. Carnivorous plants are also common. The best way to explore this spooky landscape is by canoe or kayak. Bon Voyage (0800 316 3012, bon-voyage.co.uk) has trips to the region, including two nights in

historic Savannah, which is about 130 miles from the swamp. The trip includes car hire and three days of kayaking through the area's atmospheric wet prairies and cypress forest, with meals and a guide included. With flights from Gatwick, on Delta Airlines, it starts at £1,025pp.

Peak practice

The great forests in upstate New York are where the robber barons (the Rockefellers and the Vanderbilts) constructed their grandiose summer camps for huntin', shootin' and fishin'. A precious few survive. But most visitors are here to get high: the

six million acres of the Adirondack region have 46 peaks more than 4,000ft tall, all with stunning views. Hikers "collect" them the way they do Scotland's Munros. You won't do all of them in a week or two, but a copy of Adirondack Trails: High Peaks Region (£26), by the Adirondack Mountain Club, will help you pick the best.

If money were no object, you'd stay at The Point (00 1-518 891 5674, thepointresort.com; doubles from £850, all-inclusive), on Saranac Lake, which is an old Rockefeller camp. But Wildwood on the Lake (518 523 2624, wildwoodmotel.com; doubles from £42, room-only), in Lake Placid, is more affordable yet still comes with lake views. Paddle boats, rowboats and canoes are also available to use. There are plenty of local outfitters in Lake Placid to help you get outside. The most scenic way to access the area is a drive through New England, from Boston. A week's fly-drive out of Boston with Virgin Holidays (0844 557 3859, virginholidays.co.uk) costs £425pp. It will be a 270-mile drive to Lake Placid, but there are excellent inns and B&Bs to break the journey: see newenglandinnsandresorts.com.

Native America

The Grand Canyon isn't the only attraction in Arizona, but it vacuums so many tourists that the state's other world-class sights are blissfully empty. Take Canyon de Chelly National Monument, for example, one of the largest canyons in the west, with walls that tower at about 1,000ft. The canyon is situated on tribal land, and the best way to experience it is with a Navajo guide, who will ensure you feel like you have this magical place to yourself, which you may well do.

The owners of the Totsonii Ranch (00 1-928 220 5524, totsoniiranch.com) will take you on horseback past cottonwood forests and across streams to the canyon, and to spectacles such as the Spider Rock, an 800ft spire of sandstone and caves, dotted with ancient rock paintings. You will learn the tribe's history, including their role as "wind talkers" — the

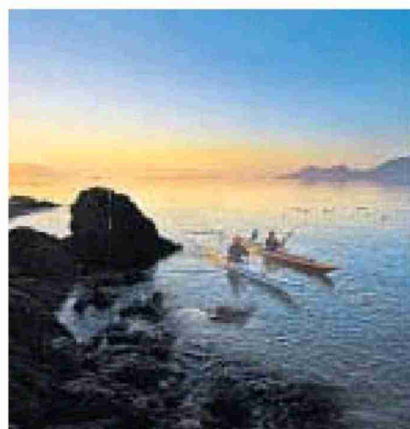
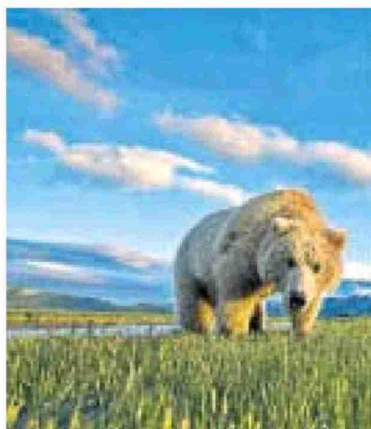
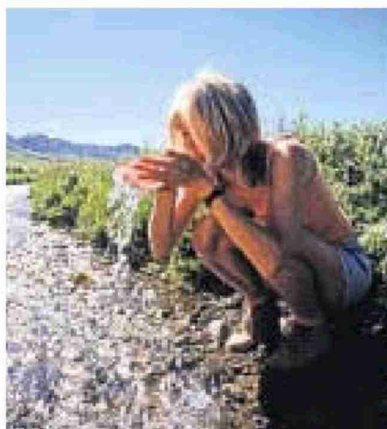


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Navajo language was used as code by the US Marines during the second world war. Two nights' camping, most meals and up to seven hours' riding a day costs £314pp. In the area, stay at the Navajo-owned Thunderbird Lodge (928 674 5841, tbirdlodge.com; doubles from £75). A fly-drive to Phoenix costs from £840pp with BA (0844 493 0758, ba.com/phoenix). Canyon de Chelly is about 300 miles northeast of the city.



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